TL961

EAST TIMOR: 460 YEARS OF RESISTANCE

presented by Maria Braz
East Timorese youth ambassador
tour of North America, April 1993

I was born in Dili, the capital of East Timor. On December 7, 1975, when I was just six years old, I escaped with my parents to Portugal. Because on that date, my country was invaded by Indonesia. I have not yet been back – but one day I hope I will return to a free and independent East Timor.

Like all East Timorese, I am part of a long and very complex history. My mother is descended from the Atsabe royal family. My great great grandfather was the Atsabe lurai or king who, I regret to say, supported the Portuguese against indigenous opposition to colonial rule. His son, my great grandfather, disagreed with the old man's policies and joined the revolutionaries to fight both his father and the Portuguese militia. His only son, my maternal grandfather, did not want to continue the conflict between his father and his grandfather, so adopted a neutral position. He spent his life raising cattle and growing coffee on the family plantation.

The Portuguese could not tolerate my grandfather's neutrality because their power depended upon support from the indigenous royal families. So they stripped my grandfather of his title and accompanying privileges and gave them to a cousin called Cipriano who was more accommodating to the Portuguese. The local people revolted against the new Portuguese-installed lurai and so to maintain law and order, Cipriano arranged a marriage between his daughter and my grandfather. In that way, he was able to control the people who remained loyal to the former lurai.

That daughter, my grandmother, is still in Timor. She is a great woman and a great survivor. Since the invasion she has had to support her family so has built up her own small business. My close relatives now living in exile in both Portugal and Australia still maintains regular contact with her and with other members of our extended family in East Timor.

Like many East Timorese, I also have Portuguese blood in my veins. My paternal grandfather was born in Alentejo, Portugal, and did his compulsory military service in East Timor. He met my paternal grandmother there and they had five children. He refused to leave East Timor when the Japanese invaded in 1942 and was betrayed and executed for defending the Portuguese flag.

Little is known about my paternal grandmother because she disappeared. We do know however, that she was born in Aileu in eastern East Timor, and from all accounts, was very beautiful. People have speculated that she was taken to Indonesia by the Japanese. In 1982 some of my relatives met an old woman in Indonesia who spoke of being married once to a Portuguese man and of giving birth to five children - but by the time we heard the story and made fresh enquiries, the old woman had disappeared again.

So you see, our history - both our personal histories and the history of our nation - is very complex and very painful. But the stories of the past enrich our humanity; they give us identity, dignity, even though they speak of great suffering. Most of all, our history is a story of resistance - our resistance against all attempts to exterminate us as a people.

Sadly the tragedy of East Timor has not ended yet, for now the younger generation - in my family and thousands of other East Timorese families - have committed themselves to the struggle for self-determination. For contrary to what the Indonesians say, there has been little rapprochement between the Indonesian people and the people of East Timor since the invasion in 1975. Even economically there is little sign of integration for the economy is still dominated by monopolies run by a few Indonesian generals. There are few opportunities for local people to earn a decent living, and few career opportunities for the younger generation.

The Indonesians boast about building roads and schools and clinics, but from our point of view, the Indonesian education system, health care, the road network and the imposed system of administration are but instruments of subjugation. My people look at them and say 'the Indonesians can't buy us with these things.' In many cases, this development only benefits the military and the Javanese and other Indonesians who have settled in East Timor as transmigrants. It does not benefit the indigenous people.

In East Timor, young people see little future for themselves while Indonesia remains in our country. They feel like foreigners in their own land. Although they've been educated in Indonesian schools and speak the Indonesian language and are forced to live by Indonesian laws, they have not become Indonesian. And they are protesting every way they can against having their identity taken from them. If you saw the news footage of the massacre at Santa Cruz cemetery in November 1991, you would have seen thousands of young people who were just babies (or not even born) when the Indonesians invaded; thousands of young men and women, even children, marching in peaceful protest. And then hundreds of them giving their lives in the front line as the Indonesians fired their M16s.

Because I am a woman, I have a particular interest in women and children, and in the role of my sisters in the resistance movement in East Timor. We women have a long history of resistance. Colonial and neocolonial invaders have always been amazed at us. Many women have become legendary. Like the Queen of Luca - known as Mary - who, in the eighteenth century commanded a rebellion for thirty years against the Portuguese. Today guerrilla detachments in the interior of East Timor are commanded by women who continue that proud tradition.

In the towns and villages , women assume vital political responsibilities and undertake secret but very dangerous assignments that link the military resistance in the mountains with the urban clandestine organisations. Health, education and production of many of the

goods necessary to continue the struggle, are also women's responsibilities. In all these ways, East Timorese women work to liberate and transform their society.

Above all, through our noble mission of motherhood, we women guarantee the future of our country, and the continuity of the East Timorese people. This is the ultimate resistance against the ethnic and cultural genocide that is being committed against our people.

Women are easy targets though. As in all wars, they are victims of rape, orture, bashings, abuse, of degradation and humiliation of every kind. Every East Timorese woman, every East Timorese family, has been touched in some way by such brutality. But, as I have said, we are not just impotent spectators and victims of the atrocities that are perpetrated by the Indonesian military against us: we are also active participants in our own liberation.

The Indonesians must know this now. They must know that they have not been able to defeat us through military force, nor by degrading or humiliating us. This is the reality in East Timor. And until our country is free, until the East Timorese people are free to determine our own destiny, there will be women and men of all ages who are prepared to resist any way they can. Unless the international community can act decisively to end violence and intimidation, East Timorese people will continue to protest and resist; and East Timorese people will continue to die at the hands of the Indonesian military.

Young East Timorese like myself have a profound responsibility to speak out on behalf of our compatriots still in East Timor who cannot speak out for themselves.

And the international community has a profound responsibility too, particularly all those countries which voted for UN resolutions which condemned Indonesia's invasion of East Timor and called for a complete withdrawal of Indonesian troops. None of those countries have done anything so far, to ensure that their resolutions are acted upon. East Timor is not Kuwait – even though, like Kuwait, we do have potentially oil fields that Indonesia and Australia both covet.

Many of those governments which supported the resolutions passed in the UN General Assembly and Security Council since the Indonesian invasion have also acknowledged 'the inalienable right of the people of East Timor to self-determination.' But so far, they have done nothing so far to turn this much quoted right into a reality.

This lack of political will within the international community has led to genocide in my country on a scale unequalled in modern times. Between 1975 and 1982, one third of East Timor's population perished. Even Pol Pot and the Kymer Rouge did not wipe out such a large proportion of the population of Cambodia. The ongoing cultural genocide – the attempt to wipe out our language and customs – has been no less violent.

People in countries like the United States of America must accept much of the responsibility for this. After all, US corporations supplied many of the weapons that have been used to kill our people, and American economic aid has supported the Indonesian regime that has caused us so much misery.

We ask you now, in this new political climate, to be responsible global citizens and stop the export of military hardware to Indonesia; stop all economic aid to that country until it respects the basic human rights of the people of East Timor - including our right to self-

determination. Please ask your members of Congress to pressure the Clinton administration to use its influence in the United Nations to push for a referendum and a real act of self-determination in East Timor, and to say 'no' to the arms manufacturers who want to ship more weapons to Indonesia.

Please help stop the cycle of violence in my country, so that young East Timorese men and women will no longer have to die fighting for basic human rights that you in the United States take for granted. So that we East Timorese, women and men, can at last determine our own political destiny.

Maria Braz is one of five East Timorese who visited North America in April 1993 to talk about the future of their occupied country. Their speaking tour was initiated by the East Timorese community in Melbourne, Australia, with the support of the East Timor Talks Campaign. It was hosted and coordinated in North America by the East Timor Action Network USA and East Timor Alert Network Canada.

For more information contact ETAN
Tel. 914 428 7299
PO Box 1182 White Plains, New York 10602